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The Syrian rebels would be immeasurably weaker today without al-Qaeda in their ranks. By and large, Free Syrian Army (FSA) battalions are tired, divided, chaotic, and ineffective. Feeling abandoned by the West, rebel forces are increasingly demoralized as they square off with the Assad regime's superior weaponry and professional army. Al-Qaeda fighters, however, may help improve morale. The influx of jihadis brings discipline, religious fervor, battle experience from Iraq, funding from Sunni sympathizers in the Gulf, and most importantly, deadly results. In short, the FSA needs al-Qaeda now.

In Syria, al-Qaeda's foot soldiers call themselves Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahli al-Sham (Front for the Protection of the Levantine People). The group's strength and acceptance by the FSA are demonstrated by their [increasing activity on the ground \(BBC\)](#)--from seven attacks in March to sixty-six "operations" in June. In particular, the Jabhat has helped take the fight to Syria's two largest cities: the capital of Damascus, where 54 percent of its activities have been, and Aleppo. Indeed, al-Qaeda could become the most effective fighting force in Syria if defections from the FSA to the Jabhat persist and the ranks of [foreign fighters \(Guardian\)](#) continue to swell.

Al-Qaeda is not sacrificing its "martyrs" in Syria merely to overthrow Assad. Liberation of the Syrian people is a bonus, but the main aim is to create an Islamist state in all or part of the country. Failing that, they hope to at least establish a strategic base for the organization's remnants across the border in Iraq, and create a regional headquarters where mujahideen can enjoy a safe haven. If al-Qaeda continues to play an increasingly important role in the rebellion, then a post-Assad government will be indebted to the tribes and regions allied to the Jabhat. Failing to honor the Jabhat's future requests, assuming Assad falls, could see a continuation of conflict in Syria.

Thus far, Washington seems reluctant to weigh heavily into this issue. In May 2012, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta publicly accepted [al-Qaeda's presence in Syria \(Guardian\)](#). And in July, the State Department's counterterrorism chief, Daniel Benjamin, rather incredulously suggested that the United States will simply ask the [FSA to reject al-Qaeda](#). The unspoken political calculation among policymakers is to get rid of Assad first

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—weakening Iran's position in the region—and then deal with al-Qaeda later.

But the planning to minimize al-Qaeda's likely hold over Syrian tribes and fighters must begin now as the Obama administration ramps up its support to **rebel groups (Reuters)**. Of course, these preparations should also include efforts to locate and control Assad's chemical weapons. The months ahead will not be easy.

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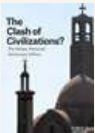
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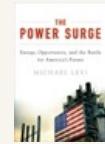
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